SIGHT WITHOUT INSIGHT

Harry J. Brevis

HV1593
B 758

AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

Coronet, v. 15, No. 5, March, 1944

All the blind ask is the chance to lead a normal life in your community. You can make it possible through understanding—not pity

HV1593
B758
Cop. 1

Sight Without Insight

by HARRY J. BREVIS

"MY SON HAS always been a sensitive lad, and now that he can't see he has become terribly nervous and high strung," she began in a soft voice.

Only the ceaseless tapping of her foot revealed her tension. "He was 18 last month. He always wanted to be a chemist. But when he was hit by a baseball last summer and lost his sight, all our plans for him went by the board. I taught him to play the piano when he was five. After the accident he practiced continually as if escaping something. A few weeks ago a famous pianist offered to give him free lessons. My son then began to take renewed interest in his work and former friends. After a short while he even began going out alone in the neighborhood.

"Yesterday he insisted on going to his teacher's studio unaccompanied," she continued. "He took his white cane along and left the house, whistling a tune he had composed. Half an hour later he returned and locked himself in his room. All I can get out of him is that he had asked someone to guide him across the street. Before leaving, the man pressed a quarter into his hand. Undoubtedly he acted out of sheer kindness, but my son was cruelly shocked at being mistaken for a blind beggar."

About five years earlier, at 26, my own life had been convulsed by the necessity of finding a path in a world made strange by blindness. And now I was being appealed to by a distraught mother to help her boy make a similar adjustment.

During the six years of my work as chaplain to the blind of Greater New York, I heard few complain about the indifference of the sighted toward the blind. But many resented the well-intentioned and often woe-

fully misguided efforts of the seeing to ease the lot of the blind. Most persons who have not encountered blindness in their own families tend to withdraw from the sightless. They look upon them with awe, suspicion, mistrust or pity—a point of view as groundless as it is unjust.

One day I was sauntering along a crowded Manhattan thoroughfare with an out-of-town college friend whom I saw infrequently. Suddenly he exclaimed, "The clock over there says it's three o'clock. I must be at the Longacre Building in exactly 15 minutes, and I don't know where we are or the quickest way of getting to my appointment."

"We are at the corner of Broadway and 72nd," I said, "and the quickest way to get to the Longacre Building is by the Broadway subway, the entrance to which you will find at the intersection of these two streets."

In his surprise, my friend almost forgot his business appointment. "Now how can you tell where we are?" he asked. "Is it the unevenness of the sidewalk and pavement, the sound of traffic, or a sixth sense which the blind sometimes develop?"

My answer was simple. I had merely kept track of the direction in which we were going and the number of blocks we had passed.

Paradoxically, those who think the blind are supernaturally endowed at the same time believe they are helpless. I recall taking a group of ladies through a workshop for the blind. They examined a number of doll wigs and baby blankets which had been ordered by a large New York department store.

One woman felt so much concern for "these helpless creatures" that she failed to appreciate the skill which made these excellent products possible. "The poor dears," she mourned sotto voce. "Do they have to be dressed and fed and brought to the shop every morning?"

Annually schools for the blind graduate sightless young men and women—otherwise physically sound—who are desperately anxious to earn a living. A small percentage are placed in subsidized workshops where they receive a pittance. An even smaller number are given newspaper stands in public buildings. The vast majority are doomed to idleness.

The case of Bill is typical. At a school for the blind, Bill received a primary and high school education,

---

Harry J. Brevis was admitted to the Michigan Bar in 1924, but when his sight failed shortly thereafter, he decided instead to enter the ministry. He was graduated from the Jewish Institute of Religion in 1929, and a year later was appointed Chaplain to the Blind by the New York Board of Jewish Ministers, dividing his attention equally between the theory and practice of social service. Besides his ministration to the sightless, he has taught Administrative Law at the University of Buffalo, has lectured widely on current social problems, and he serves at present as Rabbi of Temple Beth El in Batavia, N. Y. His Army work brought him a recent citation from the office of Major General Thomas A. Terry, Commander of the Second Service Command.

and excellent musical training. After graduation he organized an orchestra of blind young men and spent a year whipping it into shape. Although the orchestra was acknowledged to be good, no manager had the courage to engage Bill and his friends. It was feared that their presence might depress the audience. Today Bill is a beaten young man. Music no longer interests him. Since he can scrape together enough money to live on through begging, he believes his blindness to be his greatest asset.

Thousands like Bill have made heroic efforts to become productive members of society and ended up recipients of charity. But this situation is changing—slightly. The critical labor shortage has driven employers to engage blind workers to do a variety of jobs.

In the Junkers aircraft factory in Dessau, Germany, blind workers are not only permitted to do simple processes of sorting and assembling, but are trained to perform precision operations in the manufacture of bombers and fighter planes. A blind English aircraft worker fits 20 airplane boards per day as compared with a maximum of 17 per day of workers with sight.

In August, 1942, a manufacturer in New Jersey could not obtain any steel precision gauges for measuring mica spacers used in electrical condensers. These condensers are needed in every plane, tank, ship and jeep. A sightless girl was tried for this job. To everyone's amazement, her performance was more accurate than mechanical gauges devised for the purpose.

Everywhere blind workers have been found to be efficient, steady and congenial. In plants and factories from Maine to California you will find blind men and women working as packers, assemblers, shell loaders, flush-pin gaugers, shell inspectors, rivet sorters, quartz grinders, burr detectors and removers and on many other jobs. Their good fortune consists of the opportunity extended to them to demonstrate this ability. It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of blind persons now gainfully employed. But even the most liberal estimates place their number at a fraction of those who could and should be working.

FAILURE to find suitable employment makes many blind people bitter. But while they may grow accustomed to idleness, they never become reconciled to loneliness.

Of one thousand blind people of my acquaintance I should say that not more than one out of ten feels free to call on an unhandicapped acquaintance for an afternoon or evening visit. The rest have to rely on the companionship of other blind persons or—if that is impossible—to sit at home alone.

Whenever I meet a lonely blind man or woman, I think of a woman of 60 who found in a blind friend of 21 "the only source of light and warmth" in a world that had turned to ashes for her but six months before.

I know many who do not regard their association with blind friends a substitute for church-going. For ex-

ample there's a Wall Street broker who spent a great deal of time learning Braille so that he may correspond with a blind friend when business takes him out of town. And a fireman who uses much of his free time reading about birds and animals so he may answer questions put to him by an eight-year-old blind boy.

Ask yourself what you know about the blind in the United States. Do you know, for instance, that the blind constitute nearly six million of the world's population and over 200 thousand in the United States? Or that every American community of 10 thousand has to cope with approximately 10 sightless persons?

Are you aware that—barring additional handicaps—the blind share the habits and interests of other members of the social group to which they belong? Blind women learn to cook and sew. Men do chores around the house. They dance, play cards and swim. Last year at a summer camp for the blind, a blind boy saved the life of a sighted girl who had been asked to swim with him as a guide. Often the blind excel in skill games.

Notions about the blind generally are characterized by sympathy for them on the one hand and ignorance of their habits, capabilities and needs on the other. In the last analysis, the welfare of the blind in this country depends as much on society's understanding their fundamental problems as upon its willingness to help solve them.

Why not seek out a blind person and get to know him? Learn something about his background, his present associations, his way of making a living.

If you stop to measure your feelings, you undoubtedly will find that you are receiving as much in human companionship as you are giving. Plus the bonus of realizing that you are bringing some light into the lives of those who live in darkness.

Nameless Tongue

ONE OF THE GREAT Renaissance ecclesiastics could speak 96 ancient and modern languages fluently.

One day a delegation came to Rome to wait upon him. Upon being received, the leader of the delegation addressed to the churchman a speech of salutation in a strange language. He listened graciously, then made an answer in the same lingo.

When it was over, he discreetly drew one of the members of the delegation aside, and, still speaking the same language, asked:

"What tongue is it in which your leader has just addressed me?"

"What do you mean, Sir?" replied the flabbergasted foreigner. "I thought you knew it was Esthonian! You speak it like a native!"

"Yes," explained the embarrassed ecclesiastic, "I can speak it, yet never have I been able to discover its identity. I learned it from a book of which the title page had been torn away." —L. C. TIHANY

c. 1

HV1593 Brevis, Harry
B758 Sight without insight.

Date Due			

HV1593 c. 1
B758 Brevis, Harry

AUTHOR
Sight without insight.

TITLE

DATE DUE	BORROWER'S NAME
	Reference Copy

1525	9	"	6	"	"	1932	13	"	10	"	"
1526	9¼	"	7⅛	"	"	1933	14	"	11	"	"
1527	10½	"	7⅜	"	"	1934	16	"	12	"	"
1528	11	"	8	"	"						

Other sizes made to order.

MANUFACTURED BY
LIBRARY BUREAU
Division of REMINGTON RAND INC.
Library supplies of all kinds